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ABSTRACT

The paratherapist training project was begun to increase training time provided to severely and profoundly handicapped students. Twenty-one retired persons volunteered to participate in a series of skill training modules that touched upon the following topics: observation, skill training, placement, individual or small group work, and daily and weekly staffings. Ss exhibited increases in knowledge and skills related to preschool exceptional children. Increases were maintained over a 2-year period. Additionl project success included increases in direct contact time from 132 to 400 hours per child yearly and substantial increases in developmental ages of the students. Findings suggested that such an approach may alleviate the manpower shortage in special education. (CL)

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Community Volunteers as Paratherapists

for

Significantly Handicapped Children

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Community Volunteers as Paratherapists for Significantly Handicapped Children

The advent of the human rights movement of the sixties and seventies prompted many judicial and programmatic changes in the field of education. Special education, a microcosm within education, has also been influenced by this evolutionary growth spurt which has greatly profited the exceptional child (Hammill, 1972; Haring & Krug, 1975; Lord, 1974; Creekmore & Creekmore, 1980). However, the increase in services for the handicapped which were accrued from this eruption produced some counter-effects. By mandating expanded services for school aged handicapped children through the passage and implementation of P.L. 94-142, the chronic manpower shortage in special education was intensified (Savino et al., 1978; Stedman, 1976). Furthermore, the infusion of more significantly handicapped students into the public schools produced an additional problem area. Professionally trained personnel in adequate numbers simply did not exist to deal with this "new" group of children.

As late as 1962, the President's Panel on Mental Retardation revealed that only about 250,000 of the nation's 1.25 million school aged retarded children were enrolled in public school special education programs. Further, it was found that at that time, an additional 55,000 teachers of the mentally retarded were critically needed. However, during that year only an estimated 500 new teachers of the retarded were graduated (Blessing, 1967).

Recent incidence figures (Neisworth & Smith, 1978) estimate that there are 1,507,000 mentally retarded persons between birth and 19 years of age in the United States. This figure accounts only for those classified as mentally retarded and does not consider the total handicapped population which numbers approximately eight million. Of this group 2,840,000 individuals are of school age and remain unserved (National Advisory Committee on the Handicapped, 1976).

Paraprofessionals in the Literature

Both public and private colleges and universities are successfully preparing additional special educators. However, this increased production rate is outweighed by the growing number of exceptional children in need of special services. Thus the problem identified by the President's Panel in 1962 has not diminished. Although we are increasing the number of special educators, the numbers of identified exceptional children are increasing at an even faster pace. Our best is not enough.

What is the solution to this rapidly intensifying problem? Cruickshank and Haring (1957) researched the notion of using untrained personnel to aid teachers of exceptional children in three types of classrooms within public schools: 1. integration of blind children into regular classrooms; 2. education of gifted children in heterogeneous classrooms; and 3. self-contained classes for the mentally retarded, visually impaired and physically handicapped. The research offered hope that some of the personnel shortage pressure beginning to build even then could be alleviated by the use of staff who were trained to assist the professional in the education of exceptional children. It was found that through the use of teacher assistants, the professionally prepared teacher could be released to utilize her/his skills to their fullest extent. Similar positive results were found in a larger study conducted by Dunn and Smith (1965).

These first studies addressing the use of teaching aides or paraprofessionals with exceptional children clearly revealed a bias which separated clerical or helping personnel from the professionally trained staff. It was felt that personnel who lacked college training in the education of the exceptional child were not prepared to aid directly in the educational process;

they were staff and not teachers. Esbensen (1966) dared to ask the question: Should teacher aides be more than clerks? He suggests that a properly trained aide or paraprofessional should be able to perform some educationally relevant tasks under the tutelage of the teacher. Ebensen stated that the function of an effective teacher is to engineer the formal learning environment (antecedent variable) to insure the satisfaction of the specified goals for a child or group of children (consequence). A portion of the designed experience can be carried out by an educational facilitator--the paraprofessional.

Changing Roles of the Paraprofessional

During the 24 years since Cruickshank and Haring's landmark studies, much has happened in the movement of special children from the closet into the classroom. In the mid 1970's school systems became acutely aware of the difficulty involved in satisfying the discrete needs of exceptional children as a result of chronic limitations in personnel, materials and finances (Platt & Platt, 1980). These increasingly limited resources simultaneously affected developmental day care centers, group homes and institutions for the handicapped. To deal with these difficulties the paraprofessional thrust has grown concomitantly. Research is currently being focused on the effective use of paraprofessionals with preschool children (Schortinghuis & Frohman, 1974), Headstart (Jacobson & Drije, 1972), and the mentally retarded (Savino et al., 1968; Platt & Platt, 1980; Thomas, 1980; Boomer, 1980). In this research, paraprofessionals are assuming the role of partners with special educators in the teaching of the exceptional child. This partnership provides a lower student-to-teacher ratio, which has been shown to increase learning.

Additionally, the special educator or master teacher can now spend a greater amount of time in educational areas requiring specific expertise. Examples of these areas could include developing lesson plans appropriate to the needs of each child, assessment of each child's progress toward specified goals, consultation with classroom teachers and parents to facilitate effective mainstreaming, and dealing with especially difficult children.

Description of the Paratherapist Training Model

The paratherapist training project was designed to relieve the personnel and service problems faced by a university based developmental day care center for the severely and profoundly handicapped. The purpose of this project was to provide a data based manpower training program which would increase the amount of training time provided to these children.

Contact was made with community service organizations in an effort to build a cadre of volunteers to serve as paratherapists in the facility. The service scope of the developmental day care program and the pressing need to increase direct teaching time to severely handicapped students was presented to several organizations. The local chapter of Pilot Club International showed interest and applied, as a unit, to be trained to serve as paratherapists for the center.

Participants

Twenty-one retired professional women volunteered for the project. Ages of the volunteers ranged from 54-81 years, with a mean age of 62. Although professional interests were widely varied, all participants brought with them an enthusiasm to learn and a maturity and dedication to serve the project.

Training

The project goal was to improve training and education of pre-school severely and profoundly handicapped children through the use of paratherapists in conjunction with a highly skilled interdisciplinary staff consisting of the following: 1. a director who assumed administrative responsibilities and diagnostic-evaluative roles; 2. a lead teacher who functioned as the educational program manager (Boomer, 1980); 3. two team teachers; and 4. a social worker. Following a "committment clarification conference" which delineated the parameters of the paratherapists' involvement with the agency and the children, all 21 volunteers were directed through a series of "performance gates" or skill training modules conducted by the professional staff. The full training program is as follows:

Module I: Pre-test

All trainees were administered a basic knowledge of exceptional children survey which was designed by the project director. This served as a pre-training probe (see Figure 1, page). The intent was to ascertain the trainee's understanding and level of acceptance of the types of children served within the agency. These data were applied to the actual design of the training packages presented to the trainees. Further, an informal open ended interview was conducted with each participant in an effort to tentatively match the unique characteristics of the trainee to those of the children. In addition, data were collected regarding physical or psychological limitations reported by the trainees.

Module II: Orientation

Trainees were given a general orientation to the facility and a philosophy of the agency. In addition, training packets which contained parking information, individual and group training schedules, name tags, dress codes, and a roster of names, telephone numbers and addresses of all participants, including staff were distributed. Trainees were then assigned office space within the facility.

Module III: Observation

Each trainee was assigned to a professional staff member for specific one-to-one training. This staff member became the trainee's direct supervisor, and served as a resource to that individual. During the first week of the project, all trainees met with their assigned staff member at which time two children were designated for each trainee to observe. Trainees were supplied with a check-comment list of specific behaviors to observe and record. This controlled observation was directed by the supervisor for the first session with succeeding sessions performed by the trainee alone. The major components of the controlled observation included: (a) language/communication skills, (b) socialization skills, (c) mobility, (d) pre-academic performance, (e) eye-contact, (f) self-help skills, (g) group/isolate behaviors, (h) curiosity, (i) physical characteristics, (j) maturity, (k) severity of handicapping conditions, (l) responsivity to instruction and (m) unique handling requirements. Each area was rated through

the use of a Likert-type scale. Following each observation, the trainees met with their respective supervisor to analyze the session. All observations were conducted through a one-way mirror.

Module IV: Skill training

All trainees participated in intensive workshops twice weekly in which the professional staff conducted skill-training shortcourses. The content of these shortcourses included antecedent/consequence situations, self feeding techniques, behavior control strategies, and language and communication skills. Role playing and vingnettes were used extensively in the training in conjunction with videotapes of the children in actual classroom situations. All workshop sessions were practical, applied, and child specific. Trainees were able to view actual applications of the techniques to which they had been exposed. Specific competency "gates" were passed in each of the training areas before the trainee was allowed to apply that skill, even under supervision.

Module V: Placement

At the completion of 25 days of initial training (an investment of 150 professional person hours) the 21 trainees were partitioned into two teams of nine paratherapists each. With an emergency corps of three persons to be used in the event of illness, vacation, etc. Team I was composed of paratherapists who provided the greatest number of direct contact

hours per week. Team II acted as support personnel and participated on special occasions such as outings or holidays. The paratherapists worked directly with their supervisor who assigned increased training responsibilities as skills developed.

Module VI: Assignment of paratherapist to students

At the conclusion of basic training, the paratherapists began to work as educational facilitators with individual or small groups of children. Independence was strongly encouraged, but a dynamic support system was built into this new role with a supervisor immediately available if needed. The total number of contact hours received by each child was based on the individualized treatment plan (ITP) designed by the trandisciplinary team, parents and the paratherapist.

Module VII: Daily and weekly staffings

Weekly staffings were conducted for the purpose of specific skills reviews, discussion of problems, introduction of more sophisticated skill areas, and therapy modifications. Daily staffings were held with individual supervisors and usually consisted of technique changes or specific training problems.

The modular training approach was a dynamic model, which allowed the trainee to return to a former module to acquire additional skills. This helped to equip him/her to deal with a wider variety of handicapping conditions as the center's clientele changed.

Results

A noticeable increase in knowledge and skills related to pre-school exceptional children was documented for every paratherapist at the completion of training. This knowledge, when probed at one and two year

Insert Figure 1 about here

intervals, remained consistently high (Figure 2). Over the two-year

Insert Figure 2 about here

operational period, the project showed a member attrition rate of only 4.8%. The paratherapist training project successfully satisfied the following objectives:

Involved community members in a pre-school, developmental program for significantly handicapped children

Increased the skills and knowledge of the participants and maintained these effects over a two year period

Provided 4800 person-hours of additional therapy/training for children over a two year period, increasing direct contact time from 132 to 400 hours yearly per child. Expended minimal training time to prepare the paratherapists: 150 professional person hours.

Insert Figure 3 about here

Contributed to the developmental growth of the children as demonstrated by a mean increase in developmental age of 1.3 years in year one and 1.9 years during year two as measured by the Denver Developmental Screening Test (1969): This compares to an average yearly developmental growth of .9 years for each child prior to the project.

Conclusions

It has long been recognized that there is a serious shortage of skilled teachers for handicapped children. This problem is even more pronounced when dealing with the severely and profoundly handicapped child. The negative correlation between increased personnel needs and the dwindling money supplied to education has created spawning grounds for alternative personnel strategies. The shopworn saying "Necessity is the mother of invention" clearly applies to recent attempts made by special educators to provide quality training and education for exceptional children.

The Paraprofessional Training Project allowed one developmental day care program for significantly handicapped children to increase direct service to its clients. Efforts made by a small but highly skilled professional staff allowed the training and effective utilization of a group of retired individuals as paratherapists. Heretofore, older persons have been used in human service programs as "babysitters" or surrogate grandparents. The current project attempted to change this role through specific training of community volunteers. Thus, the paratherapist became an active member of the educational team. Although the scope of this project is limited, its results suggest that the use of senior citizen volunteers, when properly trained, is a possible alternative

to the alleviation of the manpower shortage in special education.

The model addresses the issues of differential staffing or flexible instructional organization (Scobey, et al., 1973), use of teachers as program managers (Boomer, 1980), and the concept of role release (Lyon & Lyon, 1980). These comprise viable components of the working, successful formula for extended staffing. Further, the approach is inexpensive, simple to implement, and surprisingly effective. The question asked by Esbensen (1966), at least in this specific case, can be answered "yes." It is suggested that this approach may be an attractive alternative to the forced reduction of services for severely and profoundly handicapped children currently caused by financial and manpower constraints.

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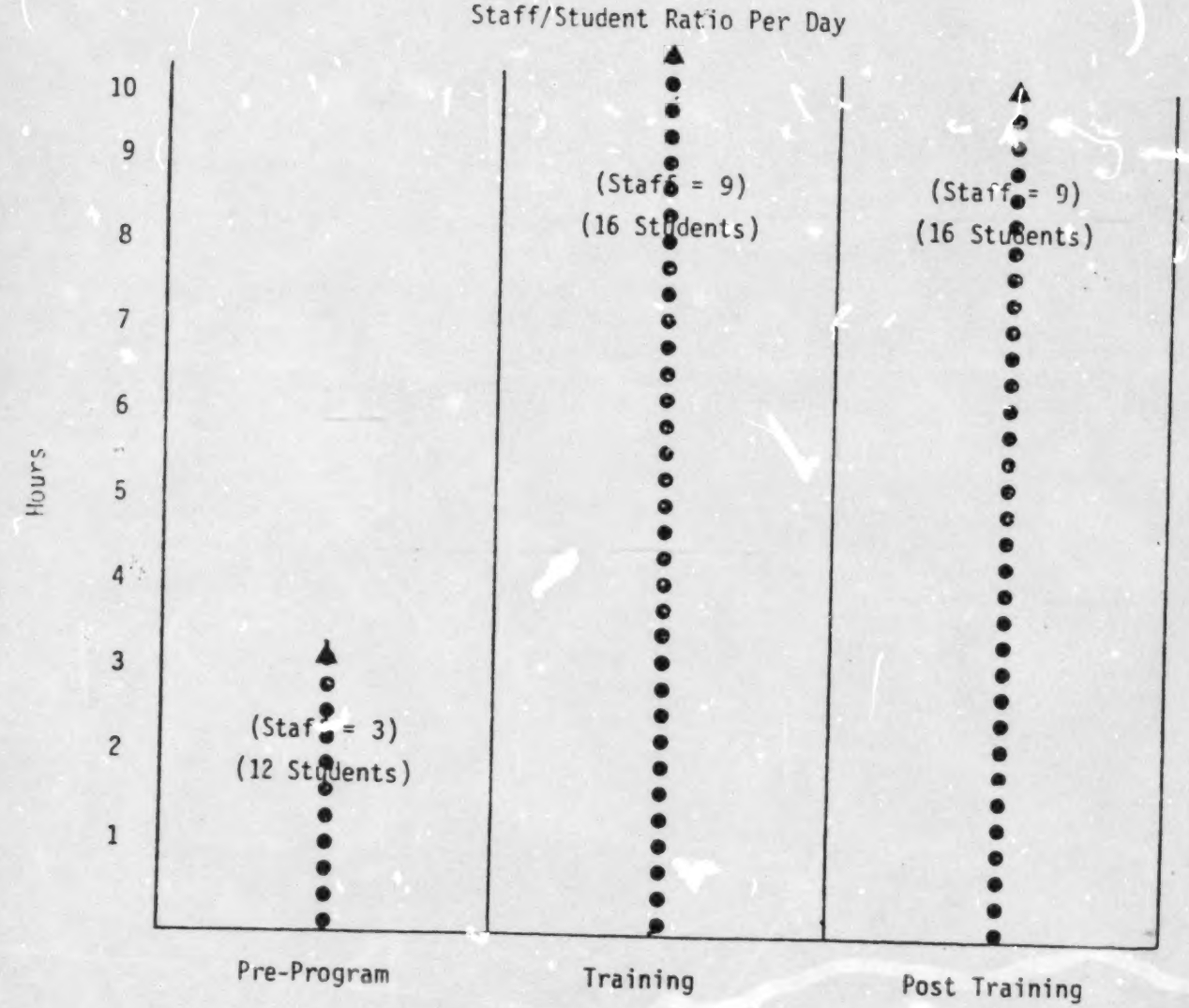
FIGURE 3



▲ = Contact Hrs./Child/Week

FIGURE 2

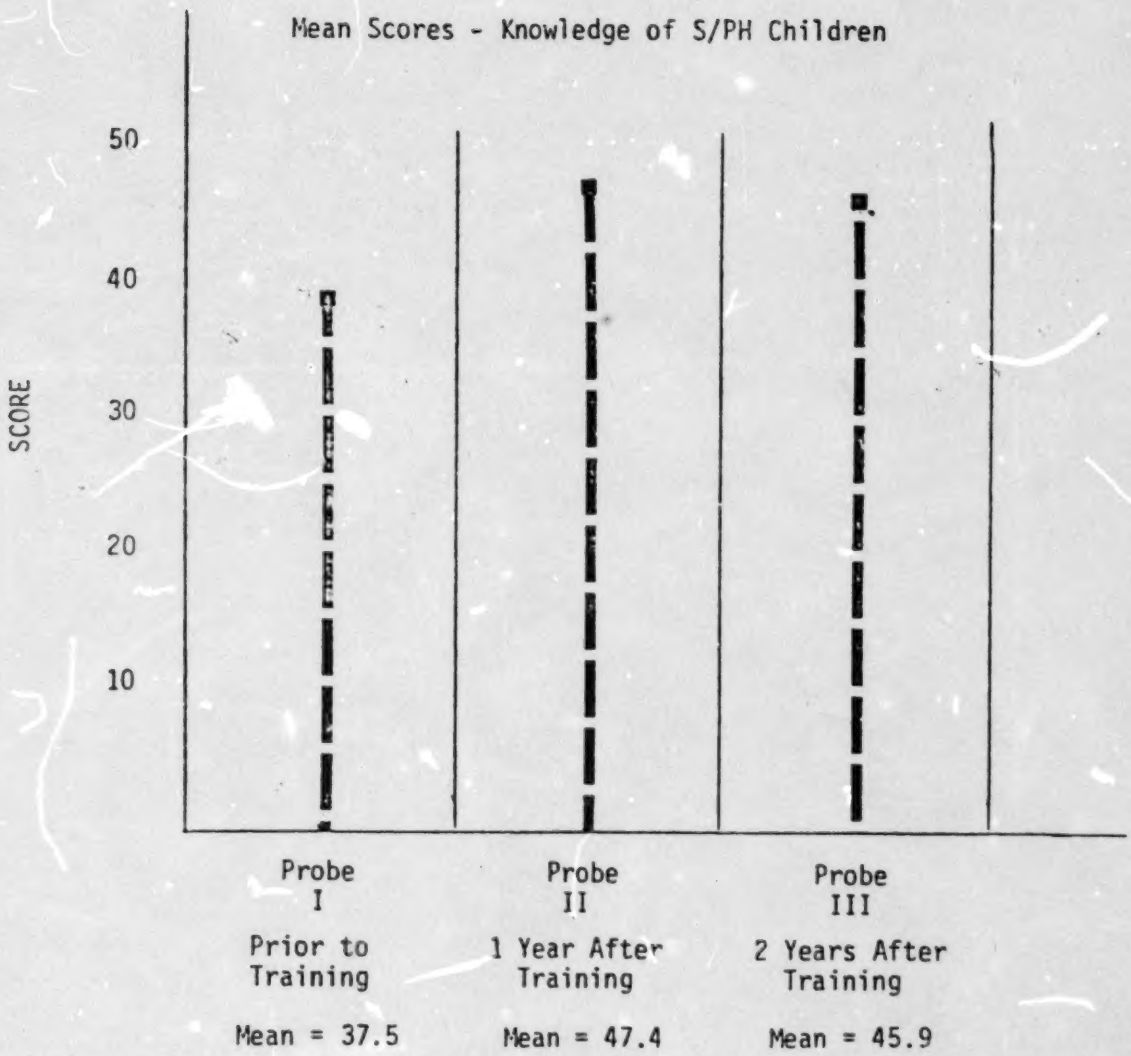

Mean Scores - Knowledge of S/PH Children
SCORE
50
40
30
20
10
Probe I
Prior to Training
Mean = 37.5
Probe II
1 Year After Training
Mean = 47.4
Probe III
2 Years After Training
Mean = 45.9

FIGURE 1

Basic Knowledge of Exceptional Children Survey